

by JEREMY LYBARGER

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Saint Mary's Cathedral on Geary and Gough is under fire this morning after [KCBS](#) revealed the church's distinctly un-Christian method of dealing with the city's homeless. About a year ago, the church installed water systems in four of the building's doorways that drench the men and women who bed down there for the night. "We do the best we can, and supporting [sic] the dignity of each person. But there is only so much you can do," Chris Lyford, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of San Francisco, told KCBS.

In a brief video of the system posted on YouTube, a steady stream of water audibly soaks a church alcove. The water falls from a hole in the ceiling (reportedly about 30 feet above the ground) throughout the night. According to KCBS, "the shower ran for about 75 seconds, every 30 to 60 minutes while we were there, starting before sunset, simultaneously in all four doorways."

A homeless man named Robert told reporters, "We're going to be wet there all night, so hypothermia, cold, all that other stuff could set in. Keeping the church clean, but it could make people sick." He added that some homeless people continue to sleep in the doorways despite getting soaked — some even bring umbrellas and waterproof gear. Moreover, the system may be violating the city's water use regulations. Now that California has authorized sweeping [water restrictions](#), it's likely the church will be taken to task

for wasting so much H2O during an historic drought. Lyford said that people who sleep in the church's doorways tend to be substance abusers (although he didn't indicate how he knew this). “It’s dangerous to have folks like that around when there’s families coming and going,” he told KCBS. He added that the church does sponsor outreach programs and offers to help homeless people, but news of the water deterrent system undercuts whatever charity the church extends elsewhere.

As *The Bold Italic* [noted](#) last month, San Francisco’s approach to homelessness isn’t nearly as liberal as many would like to believe. The city has 23 municipal codes criminalizing daily activities associated with homelessness, including sleeping in public, loitering, panhandling, and sitting/lying down in public. Saint Mary’s case is only one of the more egregious examples of a broader crackdown on homelessness.

Jennifer Friedenbach, executive director of the [Coalition on Homelessness](#), told KCBS, “It’s very shocking, and very inhumane. There’s not really another way to describe it. Certainly not formed on the basis of Catholic teachings.” The Archdiocese said it will address the situation immediately and issue a statement later today. *The Bold Italic* will update the story as it develops.

Update: The Archdiocese released this statement: "This sprinkler system in alcoves near our back doorways was installed approximately two years ago, after learning from city resources that this kind of system was being commonly

used in the Financial District, as a safety, security and cleanliness measure to avoid the situation where needles, feces and other dangerous items were regularly being left in these hidden doorways. The problem was particularly dangerous because students and elderly people regularly pass these locations on their way to school and mass every day. We are sorry that our intentions have been misunderstood and recognize that the method used was ill-conceived. It actually has had the opposite effect from what it was intended to do, and for this we are very sorry. We have also now learned that the system in the first place required a permit and may violate San Francisco water-use laws, and the work to remove this system has already started, and will be completed by the end of the day."